

Education and Economic Empowerment:

The Future for Women and Girls

Why Education & Economic Empowerment Matter

Girls' education is first and foremost a fundamental human right, but it's also the most powerful force in our hands to ensure significant improvements in health, stimulate economic growth, achieve gender equality, unlock the innovation we need to build more resilient and sustainable societies. - Director General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, July 2019

A quality education, more than any other intervention, holds the greatest potential to transform the lives of women and girls. Access to education addresses many of the other issues that impact women, including domestic violence, trafficking, teen dating violence, homelessness, teen pregnancy, and sexual assault.

Education allows women to develop the skills that command decent wages, giving them the freedom to avoid and leave unsafe situations as they have the resources to make their own decisions. Investing in women's education provides a more even playing field for women to pursue opportunities in the workforce, leading to economic empowerment.

Education enables women to command higher wages in the workforce, increasing their standard of living for themselves and their families. When women control more of the household income, more money is spent on their children's education and healthcare, and children are better educated and healthier.

Greater gender equality boosts country-wide economic growth. The economic empowerment of women is not just the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do, as it is an investment that benefits individuals, households, communities, and countries.

Barriers to Education and Economic Empowerment

Women and girls still face many barriers to education and economic empowerment. Boys are still enrolled in and complete secondary school at higher rates than girls. Women continue to consistently trail men in formal labor force participation, access to credit, and income levels. Women tend to perform the majority of unpaid tasks (i.e. housework, childcare and other unpaid activities), spending on average twice as much time on these activities as men, with a peak of five to one in Japan, Korea and India.

While all women and girls encounter gender discrimination, some are also navigating additional challenges that could derail their path to education: poverty is the most important factor in determining a girl's likelihood of educational attainment and is highly likely to prevent her from finishing school.

Additionally, women and girls encounter discrimination in the workforce and are paid less than men in every country on earth, averaging just 63% of the wages that men are paid for the same work. With less education and lower wages, women are unlikely to be economically empowered, to be able to support their families, or to ensure that their children can thrive.

The United Nations and Global Agreements

The United Nations was formed in 1945 to work for international peace, promote social progress, create better living standards, and protect human rights. The rights of women and girls and how to protect those rights are enshrined in numerous documents from the UN.

The Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) came into force in 1981. CEDAW is an international agreement that requires countries to eliminate discrimination against women in all areas and promotes women's equal rights.

The Beijing Platform for Action was adopted in September 1995. One of the primary goals of the Declaration was the enforcement of the provision of equal access to education, regardless of gender or age.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 were eight goals outlined the aspirations held by the UN for the following 15 years, including ending discrimination against women. They expired in 2015 when the UN adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) illustrate a plan for a world free of poverty and a peaceful, thriving planet. While there is one goal that addresses the empowerment of women and girls, gender equality is a crucial foundation of all 17 goals. In every member country, women are in a marginalized position in their society, preventing them from achieving the other SDGs of accessing education, nutritious food, and decent work.

The Dream Programs and the Sustainable Development Goals

As a global organization, Soroptimist International of the America's (SIA) work aligns closely with agreements focused on women and girls like the SDGs. The measurable impact achieved through our programs advances the global agenda to achieve gender equality, end poverty, and ensure no one is left behind.

Of the 17 goals outlined in the SDGs, the Dream Programs directly contribute to five goals:

SDG#1 – End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

SDG#4 – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

SDG#5 – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

SDG#8 – Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

SDG#10 – Reduce inequality within and among countries.

The Dream Programs: A Solution

Not-for-profit organizations have a crucial role to play as well in achieving SDGs. We have identified the Dream Programs as the area in which we have core competency and through which we can create sustainable, measurable change for women and girls towards achieving the SDGs.

Demonstrated Need. We conducted research regarding how many women and girls could benefit from the Dream Programs in the 21 countries and territories where SIA operates--there are approximately **20 million women and girls** who could be impacted by the Dream Programs.

Unmet Need. As part of a global community working together to advance the status of women and girls, it's important for us not to duplicate the work of other organizations. The Dream Programs address a gap in existing services.

Proven Impact. The *Live Your Dream Awards* are cash awards for women who are the primary financial providers for their family. These awards help women return to school or continue their education, which can improve women's lives in a number of ways, from leaving abusive relationships to attaining better employment. SIA has distributed more than \$30 million in funding to over 30,000 women since the program began in 1972.

The impact of the *Live Your Dream Awards* is substantial:

- 84% of recipients who completed their education increase their standard of living
 - *“If you try, you can achieve your dreams! I want to be successful and to be a help to others.” – Korean past recipient*
- 94% of recipients report an increase in self-esteem as a result of receiving the award.
 - *“The award gave me the start and validation that I needed at a dark time of my life to believe in myself again.” –US past recipient*

Dream It, Be It is a newer program that launched in 2015. It is a career-readiness program designed for adolescent girls to prepare them for their careers after secondary school. Through the program, girls learn about overcoming obstacles, choosing a career, and balancing stress.

Despite being a newer program, *Dream It, Be It* has also had impressive outcomes:

- 90% of *Dream It, Be It* participants feel more confident about their future success

- “I cannot wait to fulfill my dreams and become the best version of myself.”—Filipino participant
- 89% of *Dream It, Be It* participants feel more prepared to pursue their future career goals
 - “We learned about resilience, how to overcome obstacles, to love ourselves.” –Bolivian participant

A Singular Intervention. Research has shown there are many unique characteristics of the *Live Your Dream Awards* program that deepen and expand its impact:

- **SIA trusts recipients to make good decisions.** The *Live Your Dream Awards* stand out because cash is given directly to a woman, showing trust in her to use the money in whatever way best helps advance her education.
- **The award comes at just the right time.** The *Live Your Dream Awards* provides financial resources as women move to the next stage of their education and career to help them stay focused on the path to achieving their dreams.
- **It’s not just about the money.** The recipient knows that an organization of women believes in her ability to change her own life.
- **The ripple effect reaches far beyond award recipients.** Many recipients choose helping professions—becoming counselors, nurses, social workers, and legal advocates, working to create change in their own communities.

An Innovative Response. SIA developed the *Dream It, Be It* program after years of research to understand what girls needed to secure a successful future. More than 55,000 girls have received support, encouragement, and guidance from women in their community since the program launched.

Unique Structure. SIA has a unique structure supporting 30,000 volunteers in 21 countries and territories in 1,300 different communities. Because our programs are delivered by clubs locally, our volunteers are uniquely situated to respond to the needs of their own communities.

Volunteers are supported in their efforts by the work of the professional staff of SIA through resources, guidance, training, and financial support to the volunteers working in 21 countries and territories.

The Future

The next steps for the UN and SIA are closely aligned: support and implement responsive, community-based programming to provide access to education that ensures women and girls can achieve economic empowerment. This is the most effective, strategic way to uplift communities and the world.

Over the past five years, we have worked with our staff, leadership, and volunteers to identify a Big Goal to take us through the first decade of our second century. This research resulted in a 2021-2031 Big Goal for the organization to invest in the dreams of half a million women and girls through access to education. By both

celebrating Soroptimist success through the past century and preparing for the years to come, we can multiply our programmatic impact and invest in the dreams of women and girls around the world.

A full version of this report and all citations can be requested by emailing program@soroptimist.org.